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SIPDIS

NEA/PD FOR FRANK FINVER

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [KMDR](#) [OPRC](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: AS PROMISED, EGYPTIAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN MEDIA
COVERAGE MORE OPEN AND BALANCED

REF: A. CAIRO 6508

[1](#)B. CAIRO 6654

[1](#)1. Summary: Media coverage for Egypt's September 7 presidential election campaign largely lived up to Minister of Information Anas El Fekki's promise to be more open and balanced. While print and television the latter, without a doubt, the most influential medium in Egypt covered all candidates, the bulk of press and TV coverage focused on President Mubarak. With half of the Egyptian population illiterate, newspaper photos and TV coverage had a greater impact than print stories in determining how the majority of Egyptians viewed the presidential campaign. PA contacts remarked that competition from pan-Arab satellite channels and Minister El Fekki's promise helped to ensure better TV coverage than in years past. Nonetheless, contacts also pointed to the lack of candidate debates on Egyptian TV (ETV) as evidence that media coverage still has room to improve. End summary.

[1](#)2. Minister of Information (and President Mubarak's media advisor) Anas El Fekki promised fair and balanced media coverage for all candidates during Egypt's presidential electoral campaign. Most pro-government print and all ETV leading coverage focused on the beginning of a "new, democratic process" in Egypt. Newspaper and magazine photos and TV images undoubtedly played a large role in shaping the Egyptian public's perception of the presidential campaign, given Egypt's 50 percent illiteracy rate. On balance, Mubarak was covered with larger photos in lead articles and his image appeared on the front page of pro-government publications more than other candidates.

[1](#)3. Pro-government daily Al-Akhbar (circulation: 800,000) was the most balanced pro-government publication. Its editorial page repeatedly encouraged the public to vote and printed all the candidates' photos and their ballot symbols on September 7, in order to help citizens vote. While pro-government media coverage was more balanced than ever and the independent and opposition press were allowed to publish freely, the pro-government media that dominates Egypt's airwaves and newsstands still devoted the majority of its coverage to President Mubarak. While leading pro-government daily Al-Ahram (circulation: 750,000) used its feature pages throughout the campaign to quote pro-Mubarak "experts" who often refuted opposition candidates' opinions and promises, the newspaper did interview and profile Ayman Nour's wife in its August 20 edition.

[1](#)4. ETV coverage focused on campaign rallies, candidate statements, and the beginning of a new democratic "era," while talk shows hosted guests who emphasized the openness and fairness of the democratic process in Egypt. ETV coverage largely avoided controversial topics and discussions of candidates' platforms. Mubarak granted an hour-long ETV interview on September 4 that largely avoided confrontational questions, although Mubarak was asked to justify Egypt's Emergency Law, with Mubarak claiming that it was "an instrument to combat terrorism" in Egypt. Al-Wafd party candidate Noaman Gomaa appeared on the popular ETV program Al-Bayt Baytak ("Make Yourself at Home") on August 21 praising elections as "a good experience" for Egyptians (ref A). Al-Wafd ran TV commercials for Gomaa's candidacy on ETV, with the party's slogan "We've had enough!" included. However, limited financial resources prevented most candidates from airing ads. Several PA contacts commented that the competition from pan-Arab satellite TV and Minister El Fekki's promise helped to ensure that ETV coverage was more open than ever before.

[1](#)5. What government-controlled ETV might have lacked, pan-Arab satellite channels Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera tried to provide. Al-Jazeera (which according to some polls, has around 40 percent of Egyptian TV viewership) devoted much of its coverage to the judiciary's attempts to monitor the elections and the debate over international monitoring. Al-Jazeera interviewed and profiled Ayman Nour on September [1](#)3. During the interview, Nour criticized the large amounts of money he claimed Mubarak had spent on his campaign and pointed to his own experience in parliamentary elections as making him qualified to be president.

[1](#)6. In contrast to the more balanced coverage in most pro-

government publications, leading opposition newspapers Al-Wafd and Al-Ghad devoted coverage to only its parties' candidates Noaman Gomaa and Ayman Nour, respectively. Independent dailies Nahdet Masr (circulation: 50,000) and Al-Masry Al-Youm (circulation: 50,000) continued to distinguish themselves for fair and balanced coverage throughout the campaign, with one Egyptian NGO that analyzed media coverage characterizing the papers' coverage as "unprecedented" (ref B).

17. Established weblogs such as "The Arabist" (Arabist.net) and "Big Pharaoh" (bigpharaoh.blogspot.com), which have always been critical of Mubarak's government, continued their criticism, highlighting opposition protest rallies and an alleged NDP attempt to censor a Ayman Nour campaign ad. (Note: Almost all websites and weblogs devoted to commentary on Egypt are critical of Mubarak and his government. End note.) Popular news websites such as Masrawy (www.masrawy.com) and Good News 4 Me (www.gn4me.com) presented mostly matter-of-fact reporting, with most coverage devoted to the debate over international monitoring, the judges' attempt to monitor elections, and the various candidates' platforms.

18. A PA contact offered the following perspective on Egyptian media coverage of the campaign: "It has been a mirror of the democratic process itself in Egypt a positive step forward, but there is still a long way to go." Coverage was compared by another PA contact to "soup without spice," noting that while there was some substance to the coverage, without debates and candidates' "mud slinging," there was little that could hold the public's attention. The lack of candidate debates and the reported ETV ban on candidates criticizing one another resulted in fewer 'fireworks' than might appear in an American or European electoral campaign. However, the Egyptian media exposed the public to new faces and a new democratic process. Nonetheless, with Egypt's illiteracy rate at 50 percent and much of the public at the mercy of ETV for information, much work remains to be done for Egypt to have a media establishment than can credibly cover an election campaign.

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